WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS
3. HIS MESSAGE
March 21, 2004

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 139:1–12
Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

Startle us again, O God, with your amazing grace.
We come here today out of busy, noisy lives.
We come to be still together and to hear a different word.
So speak the word you have for us
and give us faith to know again your love for us and for all your children,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Martin Marty is a distinguished historian and scholar. He writes a lot about a lot of topics: books, essays, columns. When the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Encyclopedia Britannica* need someone to say something that is sensitive and thoughtful about religion, more often than not they call Marty.

So two months ago, Marty commented on Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (*Sightings*, 9 February 2004). He titled his column "Not My Passion."

Marty doesn't think much of the film—wonders why conservative Catholics and evangelicals who normally are opposed to violence in films find it fine if Jesus is in one and suggests that the preponderance of blood, gore, brutality, and torture is so overwhelming that the real questions—"What is this about? Why is this happening? What is going on here?"—get lost. He doesn't plan to see Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. "In Holy Week," Marty wrote, "I'll be listening to Bach's "Passion," singing about "was there ever grief like thine?" but not in the belief that the more blood and gore the holier."

So last week, as I was thinking about this whole big conversation and this sermon, I sat in my seat at Symphony Center to listen to George Frederic Handel's *Messiah*, all two-and-one-half-hours of it (which means that it lasts about as long as Mel Gibson's movie, if you add in the previews and the time you spend in line waiting for popcorn and a diet Coke). What a gift! What a miracle! It is strong and delicate, passionate and gentle, boisterous and quiet. Before the Hallelujah Chorus, near the end of Part I, there is an alto and soprano aria, "He Shall Feed His Flock Like a Shepherd." It's my favorite part actually. The two voices never sing together, but each

beautifully, elegantly announces the familiar but amazing idea that Messiah, the one who died and rose again, the one who shall reign forever and ever, is like a shepherd who gently leads and feeds his sheep. It always gets to me—and it did again Tuesday night, and part of it, I think, was that the film *The Passion of the Christ* simply ignores, misses this point altogether: the shepherd finding the lost sheep, leading the sheep.

In fairness, Gibson does not set out to tell the entire story of Jesus. I wish he had. Because the whole story is important. In *Braveheart*, he tells the story of William Wallace, Scottish patriot and martyr, describes the political and social background, makes the English look at least as dreadful as the priests in the *Passion* but takes care of Wallace's torturous execution in a few minutes, not two excruciating hours. Novelist Mary Gordon, a devout Catholic, writes, "If you take the Passion out of its context, you are left with a Jesus who is much more body than spirit; you are presented not with the author of the Beatitudes or the man who healed the sick but with a carcass to be flayed" (*New York Times*, 28 February 2004).

David Denby, in the *New Yorker,* observes that there is nothing in the movie of "the electric charge of hope and redemption Jesus brought into the world . . . none of the heart-stopping eloquence, startling ethical radicalism, and personal radiance."

John Petrakis, writing in the *Christian Century*, said that while Gibson claims simply to be following scripture, he doesn't use enough of it—no teacher, healer, no Good Shepherd, no God in the movie who follows the lost to the farthest limits of the sea and into hell itself, as Psalm 139 so beautifully announces, no prodigal father who simply will not stop loving and pursuing his children until they are safely at home again.

If I could know only one thing about Jesus other than that his death on the cross was somehow for me, it would be a story he told one day about God and about the human condition and what God does about it. It's called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and he, the young son, gets all the press, but the subject is really the father. He is the real prodigal.

You know the story. Religious legalists have been criticizing Jesus for associating and eating with the wrong kind of people: sinners, tax collectors, outcasts. Jesus doesn't argue. Instead he tells a brilliant little story about a man and two sons. The characters are unforgettable. The younger son does the unthinkable: essentially says to his father, "Old man, I can't wait for you to die. Give me my part of your estate now"—which is what the father does. No questions asked. The young son takes the money and runs and spends it all on what Jesus delicately calls dissolute living. When the young man is broke, he takes a job feeding hogs, an abhorrent job for a Jew. And then "he comes to himself." This is not great moral

breakthrough. This is a hungry, exhausted boy who remembers where there are clean sheets and three meals a day. He rehearses his speech, crafts and refines it—“I’m no longer worthy to be your son; just treat me like a hired hand, but let me come home”—goes over and over the speech on the road until he comes within eyesight of home.

His father sees him coming. Actually the old man is out there every day, morning and evening, scanning the horizon, watching, waiting, hoping. He sees the unmistakable figure of his son, the walk, the carriage he knows so well, his child, coming home! And he does the most extraordinary thing, something his neighbors would regard as almost embarrassing. He hikes up his robe and runs down the road. In that culture, men of his station don’t run. They wait in dignified patience. This father is so overjoyed he runs. His son sees him coming, starts to make his well-rehearsed speech, but can’t get it out because his father’s arms are around him and his father’s kisses and tears of joy are on his cheeks. Finally he says it: “I have sinned; I am not worthy.” The old man doesn’t even hear it. He’s busy now, planning the celebration: best robes, ring, new sandals, fatted calf. “My son was lost and is found.”

The third character we recognize, oldest child, elder brother. I’m one. We’re the ones new parents practice on. We’re the ones who get to watch later while our younger siblings benefit from all the patience and grace and generosity and freedom our parents had not yet learned when we showed up and which we taught them. Most of our presidents were eldest children. Many ministers, too. Maybe it’s because we think we have to fix all the things our younger siblings mess up and break. In any event, this older sibling is a classic: hard working, responsible to a T. Maybe he didn’t see his brother return and the amazing encounter on the road. Maybe he did. He does what firstborns do: he keeps on working. But he hears the music and laughter now and it is too much for him. He can’t go in and join the celebration and enjoy the party.

And for a second time the father leaves the house and goes out to find a lost child: this one lost in his own self-righteousness and pride. “All these years I’ve been loyal and steadfast and you never gave me a goat.” But “this son”—notice the sarcasm, the hurt—“this son” of yours who “wasted your money with prostitutes.” He’s the one who brings up the subject of sex; the father ignores his speech as well. “Son, you are always with me; all that I have is yours. But we have to celebrate; your brother was dead and is alive, was lost and has been found.”

There is a startling concept of God in this story: a God who comes after the lost, waits patiently watching, but at the first opportunity runs down the road to welcome the lost home again, leaves the party to find and recover the ones who are in self-imposed exile. It’s a radical theology, but it is

actually not new. It's as old as the Psalter, Israel's hymnbook. Jesus knew the Psalms: memorized them as a child, recited and sang them. He knew these amazing words:

> Where can I go from your spirit?
> If I ascend to heaven you are there;
> If I make my bed in hell, you are there. (Psalm 139)

In addition to a God of justice and righteousness, Israel experienced a God of unconditional love who never gives up and never stops pursuing lost children.

So the cross, on which he will later die, becomes a symbol of that love that will go anywhere to find us—even there. Words will never encompass all the meaning of his death. He died for us. His suffering was for us. One idea is that his death is the necessary payment for our sin. It's in the Bible: "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all and with his stripes we are healed." That is profoundly true. But what is equally true is that Jesus shows us a God of love who comes running down the road to welcome us home.

The love comes before the confession. The young son doesn't get to apologize before he receives his father's forgiveness. Another profoundly radical word: God's love and forgiveness come even before we say we're sorry. That is hard for us. We can get our minds around this notion of forgiveness if there is proper penitence, remorse, penance, or at least a proper apology. But this is different. This is a forgiving love that doesn't wait for an apology but reaches out to the lost. This is a love so profound that it inspires profound repentance: repentance not in order to receive forgiveness, but repentance that comes out of the very depths of the soul because forgiveness has already been given.

And this wonderful story suggests that part of the truth about the human condition is in the word *lost.* For most of our history we have been thinking about sin: sin as disobedience, original sin, sexual sin, sin as pride, sin as willfulness, "total depravity," our theological ancestors called it. "Jesus came to save us from our sins. Jesus died to forgive our sins, wash away our sins," we say. But the truth is we have more problems than sin. We get lost. We stray—from our best intentions, our promises, our loves, our commitments. We stray from our own better selves and from God, and we get lost. And the good news is that God doesn't give up on us but follows us and comes after us and wants to welcome us home.

Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest, popular teacher and writer before he died recently, wrote a wonderful book on the Prodigal Son. Actually, it is a personal meditation on Rembrandt's masterpiece "The Return of the

Prodigal," which hangs in the Hermitage. In the painting, the son is kneeling in front of his father, an elderly, dignified man. The father's hands are placed on his son's shoulders. Nouwen noticed that one hand was masculine, but the tapered fingers on the other hand were decidedly feminine, and concluded, if there were ever any doubt, that the father is really a symbol of God's love, which is both paternal and maternal and, most important of all, a love that everyone of us desperately needs.

When Nouwen first saw Rembrandt's masterpiece, it was at the end of a long and arduous journey. Nouwen was tired, exhausted from his demanding schedule of traveling and lecturing, and he wrote about the painting that it "brought me into touch with something within me that lies beyond the ups and downs of a busy life, something that represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit, the yearning for a final return, a sense of safety, a lasting home."

And then Nouwen became confessional in a way most of us can understand: "the question is not 'How am I to find God?' but 'How am I to let myself be found by him?' Not 'How am I to know God?' but "How am I to let myself be known?' Not 'How am I to love God?' but 'How am I to let myself be loved by God?' God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, longing to bring me home. . . . Can I accept that I am worth looking for?" (pp. 100–101).

Two writers who think deeply about their own spiritual journeys have helped and inspired me for years, not only because of their eloquence, but also because of their honesty. Kathleen Norris, who hadn't been to church for years and hadn't thought much about it, started attending her grandparents' Presbyterian church in Lemon, South Dakota. Norris remembers, "I came to understand that God hadn't lost me, even if I seemed for years to have misplaced God." Older mentors nudged her gently, she remembers, and one said to her, "If you don't feel as close to God as you used to, who do you suppose moved?" (*Amazing Grace*, p. 3).

And Frederick Buechner, who had virtually no official religious experience or affiliation, trying to be a writer in New York City and not doing very well, walked into a Madison Avenue Presbyterian church one Sunday morning because he had nothing better to do, heard George Arthur Buttrick preach, and later wrote, "At the end I am left with no other way of saying it than what I found was Christ—Or was found. It hardly seems to matter which" (*The Sacred Journey*, p. 6).

If I didn't know anything else about Jesus other than his death on the cross, I would want to know this: the story he told one day about a father and two children and the father's unconditional love for both of them, the forgiveness that preceded any confession, the father's amazing grace that

comes down the road, goes out into the field, the amazing grace of God that comes to wherever we are, whatever road we walk, whatever field we till, and invites us to come home.

And that is also what is going on when Jesus Christ suffers and dies. It is more than the settling of an account, the satisfaction of justice. It is love, the love of God going all this way, all the way into hell itself for us, experiencing the last moment of our mortality because of that unconditional love.

And I like to think that as he died he remembered, "Whither shall I go from your spirit? If I make my bed in hell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your right hand shall hold me fast."

Have you ever been lost, really lost, and then wonderfully found? It's a silly little story and it happened a very long time ago, but I do think of it every time I hear this parable. I was just six. We had moved to a new house in a new neighborhood and a new school. I was in first grade. The school was five blocks away—straight up a hill two blocks, turn left two blocks, right one block and there it was: D. S. Keith School. My mother walked with me a practice run or two, then walked with me on Monday morning and as she left, told me again how to find my way home. Well, I took a wrong turn—turned left instead of right—and became utterly, absolutely lost, so lost I can still remember it. Nothing looked familiar. I knew I was further and further from home. I was scared, and I probably was crying although I don't remember that part. What I remember was my father's whistle, the high tune he whistled, when he got off the bus after work, to let us know he was home, and then I do remember seeing him at the bottom of one of those endlessly steep hills, looking for me, and I do remember what that felt like to be found and safe and home.

And I do believe that Jesus reveals a God who comes to each of us like that.

But Jesus didn't finish the story. The elder brother is still outside when the story concludes. And maybe it's because he wants you and me to finish the story in our own lives (see Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life: The Prodigal Father*)—to allow ourselves to be found and forgiven and loved by him, to walk into the banquet hall and take our seat at the table. God's child, home and safe—forever. Amen.